

Teachers of Latinos on the Margins: Beginning at a Pedagogy from Within

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Abstract

This pedagogical reflection essay considers how teacher candidates can use their own lived experiences, biculturalism, and bilingualism as sources of pedagogy and empowerment for not only marginalized Latino students but for themselves, too. The learning of this pedagogy and ability to empower comes from the interactions they have with marginalized students and learning how to reveal what is making them silent and to create space for their voice. Much of this discovery of self and others comes in their preparation to become teachers, which must be facilitated by teacher educators beyond the classroom. As future teachers of the marginalized, in these lived encounters, they realize that they already have much to build on from their own experiences and that they have the ability to teach and create change in our schools and classrooms now.

Understanding Silence

We can no longer accept silence. When educators are working with marginalized Latino students, they must always be cognizant of the idea that “hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it” (Freire, 1970, p. 91). Although the marginalized may be physically present in our classrooms, their silence hints of a kind of void that for too long schools, teachers, parents, and the students themselves may struggle to comprehend. The silence of the marginalized may be an uncovered desire for an encounter to inspire; it may be a need to engage, but kept still for fear of rejection; it may be wanting to understand, but not knowing how to use the tools that the teacher has provided. The voice of the marginalized seeks someone, or something, to magnify the message(s) they have to tell the world. Their voice is one that “relates to the variety of ways by which students actively participate in dialogue and attempt to make themselves heard and understood, as well as the manner in which they define themselves as social beings” (Darder, 1991, p. 66). But this voice is often diluted by that which is keeping them marginalized—poverty, lack of English language proficiency, undocumented immigration status, violence, lack of opportunity to really learn, hopelessness. And, in the context of schools, voice is essential in the “student’s ability to participate and enter into dialogue within the classroom, and as a result, participate in a democratic social process” (Darder, 1991, p. 66). As Darder (1991) explains, the student voice defines who they are. And this voice is also a projection of who and what that student can become.

But this voice of the marginalized is often difficult to find in the minutiae of everyday teaching and learning. Every good educator knows that it is there in every one of our students. Most of the time, it is found in student school work, such as that powerfully moving essay they wrote or the speech they gave in English, their second language, in front of the class. It is found in the change of attitude, radically different from the disengaged and violently resistant student they were before. It is found in the acceptance of a teacher’s words of encouragement and mentorship. It is found when such a student attends tutoring to get the help that they need, no longer denying that just a little more help with their homework will lead to better understanding. It is found in more involvement in activities where the student can feel like they are part of a small community.

Yet, there are times when educators, all educators, struggle to find the voice of the marginalized that has been silent for so long, veiled by a façade of simple presence. And this is often no fault of their own. The voice of the marginalized may be found in spaces that may not be, upon first glance, fully comprehensible. But being able to recognize the peculiar spaces where this unprojected voice may appear is where teachers of the marginalized Latino student can become much more powerful, and impactful, than they are now.

I believe that my students attending college here on the Texas-Mexico Border—not yet certified teachers, but going through our education program, learning theory and methods—have this ability to recognize this voice

in the marginalized. And with this skill, they have the power to teach, and to make a difference now. I'm just not sure that they realize how powerful they already are.

Struggle and Sacrifice

I teach in a college of education. My students are future teachers. The college degrees and formal education received from our university have often come at an expense for many of my students. One came back to tell me how her husband divorced her because he did not support her educational and professional endeavors. He did not feel comfortable knowing that his wife was smarter than he. One experienced child custody battles. One has broken down in tears in the midst of a class session, dealing with a husband who wanted a divorce because he thought she needed to lose weight. One gave birth one week, only to return to class the next week because she was so dedicated to her studies—even with the option I gave her to take time off to be with her baby. And one had to put his dream of teaching on hold because the criminal background check halted his public school internship (due to a mistake he made in his adolescent years).

These life sacrifices and struggles make my students powerful as future teachers. Sometimes they know this. Sometimes they do not. But they all must be reminded that their stories, those sacrifices, are where they can begin their pedagogy. I often share my own experiences growing up of living both a privileged life during the school year and another life during summer visits with my alcoholic father, who was poor, unemployed, and knew little about being a good father. But I now know that he tried with what he had. Although I admit that I did not and do not have to sacrifice like many of them, I explain how the sacrifices, struggles, and stories of others, like my father, have become an important part of my own narrative, which grounds my life, and ultimately, my pedagogy.

For the marginalized students in our schools, this pedagogy often must be utilized first before the teaching of state-mandated content. This pedagogy from life and struggle is their voice that must be awakened, utilized, and taught in the midst of teaching math, science, or history. We have to recognize that for the marginalized student this pedagogy may be the signal that awakens their voice, and brings them out of silence. But even many of our future teachers live in some sort of silence that we teacher educators must recognize and be able to guide toward a place of empowerment. For future teachers of marginalized Latino students, their voices for empowerment must be awakened, and embraced, first.

Because many of my students are so much like the students they are currently learning about, and will soon teach, they have a great deal of power that not many other future and current teachers have in U.S. schools. My students are in a unique position to serve a growing, and very important, segment of the U.S. population: Latinos—but in particular, students of Mexican-descent, English learners, and immigrants. In this current climate of anti-Latino discourse, my students must be positioned to understand very clearly the unique indicators, those hints, of students living on the symbolic and real margins of life and schooling. And this begins with my students realizing that this type of pedagogy begins with them, and from within.

Realizing Power

So many of my students do not realize their power. So many of my students do not recognize that their lived experience is one that their future Latino students—those living and experiencing schools on the margins—yearn for. So many of my students—themselves being English learners, socioeconomically marginalized, first-generation college attendees—do not realize what they can already do as teachers.

As students living, working, and attending university in a bicultural and bilingual world, they possess what Trueba (2002) believes are forms of cultural and linguistic capital in multiple identities that will help them better adapt to the shifting social, cultural, and educational paradigms of the world. He saw such students as having evolving abilities to adapt and enact a new cultural capital and way(s) of being, surviving, and even thriving in multiple contexts. But, as I also have discovered, even my non-Latino, non-Mexican-descent students begin to develop a similar bicultural and bilingual sensibility within their pedagogical and philosophical framework. Almost by virtue of living on the US-Mexico border, attending a university on the border, interacting with students who

have lived a border existence, they themselves are also becoming bicultural and bilingual. Granted, their level of bilingualism varies, but, indeed they have come to know the power of their emerging bilingual and bicultural identities. Those non-Latinos are often surprised themselves to reach a certain level of linguistic and cultural understanding that they recognize gives them a great deal of power, and ability to empower, as future teachers. These students, non-Latino and Latino alike, are part of a special process of learning, understanding, discovering, and practicing a pedagogy that reaches sometimes the unreachable.

So in my teaching, I guide my students through a dizzying pedagogical maze that they must embrace to be empowering teachers of the marginalized. I facilitate individual and small group problem-solving exercises that closely examine schools, society, and themselves. I demand excellence in preparation, thinking, and learning. And as a result, most learn something. Most get passing grades. Most are prepared for their state certification exams. But do they understand? Do they carry with them that sense, that knowledge, that indeed they have the ability to empower the marginalized student? That they have within them the stories, the experience, the language, the lessons of life that will ultimately be the pedagogy of hope that will convince and entice students living on the margins to give math, science, social studies a chance? To give school a chance? To give themselves a chance to be great?

I believe so, but it is not always so apparent. Like many first-generation college students here on the border, my students will struggle academically. They may even have issues with the English language, juggle multiple life and school responsibilities, or struggle to make a tuition payment. In the end, they effectively deal with such issues and do well. But when it comes to feeling confident, to truly know, that they have what it takes to be a great teacher, even at that moment, I sometimes wonder.

During regular 15-week semesters, I also assign my students to field experiences tutoring and mentoring English learners, a type of service-learning project. This is where they begin to get a good dose of the struggles of English learners, as well as the overall complexities of school and classroom life today. In discussing these realities of teaching in today's classrooms, working with difficult, defiant, and complacent students, or knowing how to reach students who express no hope or confidence in the education system, I get the sense that my students are not quite sure of their abilities to reach and teach such students. They get discouraged. They passively accept that the schools are broken, and that is simply the world in which they will make their professional lives. They may do their best, but they feel their best won't change much. Of course, this is to be expected as beginning students in education. They believe that as "just college students" who are not yet teachers, they are still learning. They feel that they still need more methods or theory courses, or experience from their internship, to show that they know how to work effectively with students. They don't feel that they can be effective or useful to those marginalized students until the end of their program, when they graduate, and when they are certified as teachers.

Then the end of the semester comes. My students have written their journals and reflective essays, citing their methods textbooks and other literature studied in the course, all nicely connecting theory to practice. As a class, in small groups, and with me, we have dialogued, reflected on, and debated the theory, concepts, problems, solutions, and realities of today's schools and the students within them. And then, on the last day of class, they tell their stories of experience with the English learners they tutored and mentored. One student tells of her overwhelming sense of joy and empowerment that she felt when her mentee hugged her on the last day of tutoring/mentoring, and expressed how she helped them to learn to read. One student talks about the amazing generosity of the several third graders she tutored/mentored who collected some money from each other, a few coins, to purchase a candy bar from the vending machine for her as a departing gift and symbol of gratitude. Another student tells us how he cried on his last day of tutoring/mentoring when his mentee cried and pleaded with him to be his teacher forever. And another one of my students expressed their pride in knowing that they indeed made a difference in the life of a student because that student told them so.

In the "un-projected" student voice there is hope. Hope can be found in the most unusual spaces. This hope is sometimes within the concrete as well as in the imagined. But a fuller picture of hope is realized when the voice is revealed and the student is allowed to hear and better know their own hope within that voice. In my work as a teacher educator and researcher at a Texas-Mexico border university, many of my students often struggle to find that voice not only within the students that they work with in their field experiences,

or during the student-teaching semester, but also within themselves. At least in the beginning. Because they soon overcome the self-doubt in their pedagogy. They begin to know their students, their lives, their voices in the midst of learning to teach and to empower. Then they find their own voice of empowerment. And, it seems, when they know that their students have come away from this semester-long, albeit brief, encounter—expressing gratitude and a new understanding, my students begin to see that they already have what it takes to be great teachers.

References

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